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# *International Boundary Study*

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## **BURMA-LAOS BOUNDARY**



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## INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY STUDY

No. 33

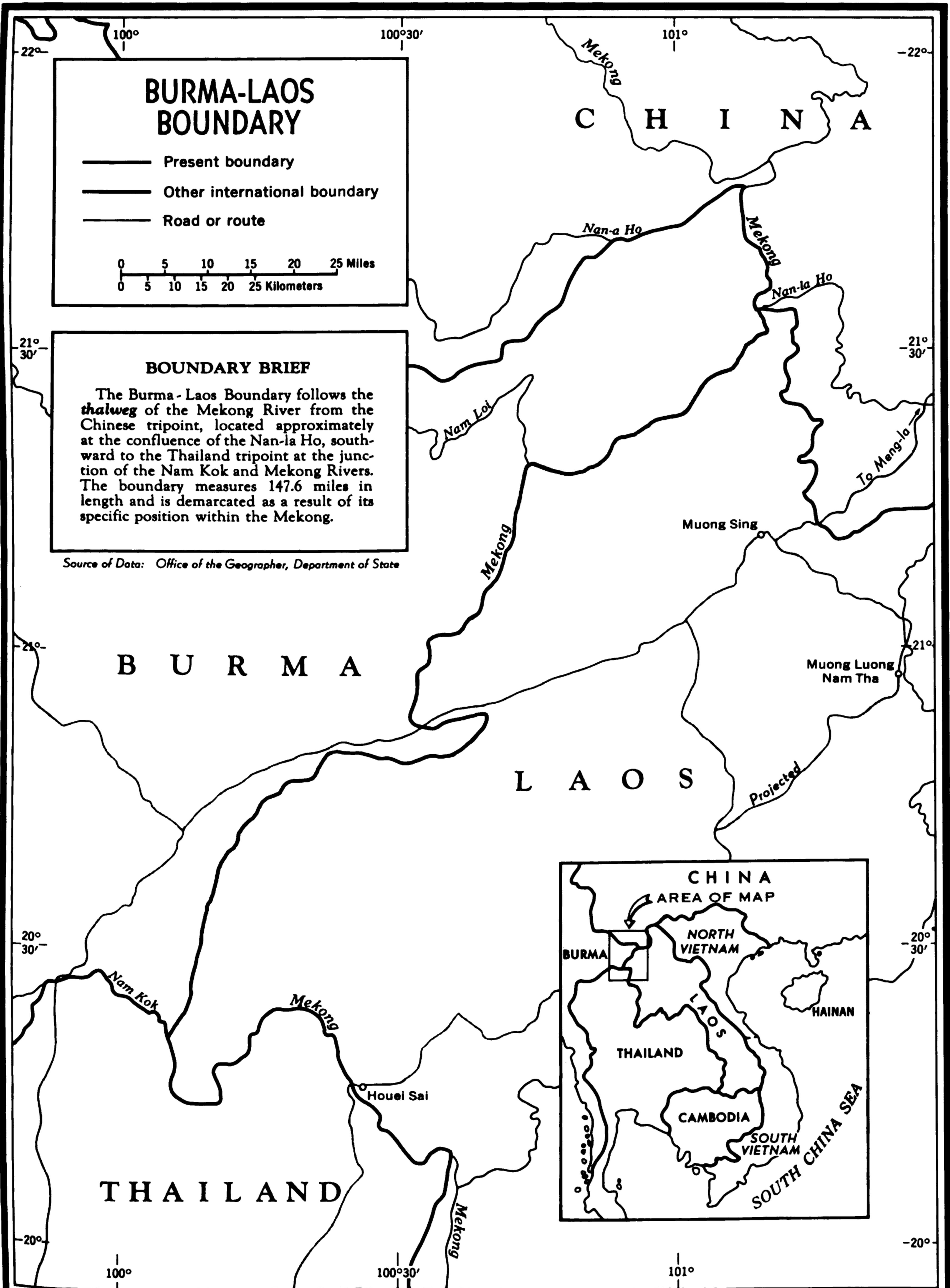
Burma - Laos Boundary

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## BURMA - LAOS BOUNDARY

### I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

The Burma - Laos boundary follows the thalweg of the Mekong river from the Chinese tripoint, located approximately at the confluence of the Nan-la Ho, southward to the Thailand tripoint at the junction of the Nam Kok and Mekong rivers. The boundary measures 147.6 miles in length<sup>1</sup> and is considered demarcated as a result of its specific position within the Mekong.

### II. BACKGROUND

#### A. Geographical

The Burma - Laos frontier region is an extensive mountain and plateaus area dominated by crystalline rocks in the south and west and sandstone and limestone in the north and east. The predominant trend of the relief is northeast-southwest as reflected by the alignment of the Mekong valley. With few exceptions, the Mekong and its tributaries flow through deep and narrow valleys. In places, the Mekong valley takes on a gorge-like appearance. Plains are relatively extensive only to the east in Laos. Maximum elevations reach over 6000 feet in the north, although the average upland level is slightly over 3500 feet above sea level. Tributary valleys range between 2500 feet and 1600 feet, the elevation of the Mekong in the north. A slight decrease in elevation occurs southward in the direction of the Thailand tripoint. Here, the Mekong valley measures about 1200 feet in elevation and the surrounding uplands are under 3000 feet.

Climatically, the Burma - Laos frontier region possesses a humid, subtropical regime characterized by a strong monsoonal development. The average annual temperature is approximately 75° F. with three summer months--June, July, and August--above 85° F. June, the month of the beginning of the summer monsoon, is slightly hotter than the other two. The coolest months--January and February--average slightly below 65° F. No secondary maxima or minima occur.

The rainy season commences in April and reaches its peak in July and August, with each month having over 20 inches of rainfall. June, the next month in total precipitation, averages between 8 inches and 20 inches, while the remaining "rainy" months each receive from 2 to 8 inches. The months from December to March, inclusive, constitute the "dry season," and monthly rainfall averages less than 2 inches. Annual precipitation totals between 80 and 120 inches in the northern half of the frontier region and slightly less in the south.

As would be expected, the Burma - Laos frontier region bears a heavy mantle of rain forest. Scattered clearings are found in the tributary valleys and normally stem from human occupancy. The rain forest is typical of the upland areas of the Indochinese peninsula. Pure stands of trees are rare which, when combined with the isolation of the region, limits commercial utilization of the forests. The forests are multilayered, relatively open and traversable and abound in

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<sup>1</sup>Measured in the Office of the Geographer on British one-inch maps (1:63,360).

many species and varieties of trees. Where the native "slash and burn" type of agriculture has been practiced, the true rain forest is often replaced by a secondary type. Although lacking the valuable and slow-growing hardwoods, the secondary rain forest, however, closely resembles the original vegetative cover.

#### B. Ethnographical

The principal regions of national or cultural development in Indochina, as well as the remainder of Southeast Asia, have been the lower courses of the major river basins. Here, wide plains, subject to periodic flooding and replenishment of soils by alluvium, offer the ideal habitat for paddy rice culture. Away from these lowlands, in the upper courses of the rivers and in the highlands, cultural and ethnic homogeneity gives way to a multitude of peoples by-passed by the main stream of civilization. The Burma - Laos boundary region is no exception. While the ethnic distribution is very complex and tribal units are intermixed, certain generalizations may be made. In the north, the Mekong has not proven to be an ethnic divide. Tibeto-Burman (Akha) peoples inhabit both sides of the river. In the extreme north, the density of population is very low, being under 1 person per square kilometer. Further south, but still in the upper valley, the density increases slightly but does not exceed 10 per square kilometer. Along the Mekong proper, isolated pockets of ethnic Tai also exist.

In the center, the Mekong takes on more of an aspect of an ethnic frontier with the appearance of the Shan peoples on the Burmese side of the boundary. Tibeto-Burmans (Lahku) continue in Laos with an extensive intrusion of ethnic Tai in the region of the big bend of the Mekong. As in the sector immediately to the north, population density remains sparse, averaging between 1 and 10 persons per square kilometer. The Shan peoples continue to dominate the Burma side of the boundary to Thailand, although Kaw (Akha) and Kwi villages are found in the uplands. In Laos, however, the Tibeto-Burmans are replaced by ethnic Tai peoples.

Settled villages exist in the valleys of the major tributaries of the Mekong. Elsewhere, the peoples practice the traditional semi-migratory "slash and burn" type of agriculture. A village is established and fields are "cleared" by slashing, burning and/or girdling of trees. The organic ash from the burned or rotting trees serves as a fertilizer. The principal crop is upland rice but the local diet must be supplemented by the products of household vegetable plots, hunting, fishing, and the gathering of uncultivated fruits. After the soil loses its natural fertility, the fields are abandoned and the cycle recommences with the abandoned plots soon returning to their natural state.

#### C. Historical

The frontier region has stood apart from the historical developments of the adjacent civilizations and states. During the great period of Cambodian expansion in the 12th century, the region appears to have been peripheral to the Khmer empire. However, with the southward expansion of the Tai into the upper valley of the Menam, the upper Mekong tended to become the frontier between the Tai peoples, and the developing Laotian kingdom centered in the middle Mekong. Although these kingdoms waxed and waned, the frontier apparently remained on or near the Mekong valley.

European influence remained limited until near the close of the 19th century. France, in gaining control of the Indochinese peninsula, raised fears in many British minds concerning possible expansion in the direction of India. A British policy, predicated upon the maintenance of an independent Siam as a buffer between the two states, was quickly developed. Britain and France soon agreed to this idea but did not extend its application to the north. As a consequence, British influence pushed into the region of the Shan states, which were under Burmese suzerainty. In 1896 the Mekong finally became the accepted frontier.

In recent times, the border area has been highlighted as a result of several seemingly isolated factors. In the period after the Chinese communist take-over, Nationalist irregulars operated from bases in northern Burma and Laos in their conduct of guerrilla operations against the mainland forces. While these activities have been curtailed recently, they do not appear to have been eradicated. Elements of the Nationalists have intermarried with tribal peoples and continue to inhabit the border areas.

As the Chinese communists expanded their control over the mainland and turned their attentions to neighboring areas, they commenced an intensive program of road building. As an aid to Laos, Chinese engineers have been constructing a road from Meng La, in Yunnan, to Nam Tha in north-western Laos and thence southward to Houei Sai on the Thai border not far from the Burma tripoint. The strategic importance of this road is immense, for it would tie together the Chinese network of southern Yunnan with the main road system of northern Thailand.

Finally, the border region has not been completely under the control of either national government. In Laos, Pathet Lao forces occupied the entire border region with the exception of a wedge north of Houei Sai. Similarly, Shan insurgents have been operating in the adjacent area of Burma against the troops of the national government.

### III. ANALYSIS OF BOUNDARY ALIGNMENT

The alignment of the boundary is defined precisely and simply; the thalweg, i.e., the line of the deepest navigable channel, of the Mekong from the Chinese frontier to the confluence of the Nam Kok with the Mekong. Practically, however, a certain problem would exist in determining the precise thalweg for several breaks in navigation occur as a result of rapids. The "difficulty" is not of importance in view of the lack of population and the very limited use of the river. Furthermore, French and British large-scale maps show the boundary in the same manner and apportion the few islands in the river in a similar manner.

The Chinese frontier with Laos has been delimited by Sino-French diplomatic action, and the boundary reaches the Mekong along the minor watershed immediately south of the Nan-la Ho. The Burma - China boundary continues northward along the Mekong.

### IV. TREATIES

Only one international act directly affects the Burma - Laos boundary:

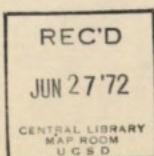
A. Declaration relative to the delimitation of French and English possessions along the frontiers of the Kingdom of Siam made January 15, 1896.

Article III of the Declaration states "A partir de l'embouchure du Nam-Huck (Nam Kok) et en remontant vers le Nord jusqu'a la frontière chinoise, le thalweg du Mékong formera la limite des possessions ou sphères d'influence de la France et de la Grande-Bretagne ...".  
BFSP 88:13; J.O. 23 Janvier 1896.

V. SUMMARY

The 147.6 mile-long boundary is delimited by international act and demarcated by the specific position within the Mekong river. No disputes are known to exist although the frontier region is not under the total control of either nation and incidents may occur. Both French and British maps represent the boundary in the same manner, although the British one-inch maps (1:63,360) BURMA - Southern Shan States, show it in the best detail. The Army Map Service 1:250,000 series is also accurate within the limitations of scale.





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